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ABSTRACT

Criticism of the construct "children and families at risk" has grown substantially in recent psychology and education literature. The practical and the semantic issues surrounding this criticism are explored in this paper. Four major objectives are presented here: (1) to provide psychologists with an increased level of awareness relative to the contemporary discourse involving the "at risk" and the "at promise" construct debate; (2) to provide psychologists with an increased level of awareness relative to the current discourse involving the "at risk" paradigm and the resiliency paradigm approaches for identifying and serving children and families who are viewed as having serious and/or multiple needs; (3) to identify specific situations in which the "at promise" construct has the potential for producing negative outcomes for many of the most vulnerable children and families; and (4) to present and discuss an alternative model which accommodates the positive aspects of both the "at risk" and the "at promise" approaches, emphasizing the complementary, rather than the oppositional qualities of these two constructs. (RJM)

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CHILDREN AND FAMILIES "AT PROMISE": A LAUDABLE BUT POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS CONSTRUCT

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ABSTRACT

Criticism of the construct "children and families at risk" has grown substantially in recent psychology and education literature. Currently, calls are increasing for the deconstruction of the "at risk" construct and replacing it with a new construct, "children and families *at promise*." Advocates for this change, primarily proponents of the *resiliency* research paradigm, argue that the "at risk" construct and research paradigm is too deficit oriented, leads to negative stereotypes, and tends to victimize rather than to help its target populations.

This paper has four major objectives: (1) to provide psychologists with an increased level of awareness relative to the contemporary discourse involving the *at risk* and the *at promise* construct debate; (2) to provide psychologists with an increased level of awareness relative to the current discourse involving the *at risk* paradigm and the *resiliency* paradigm approaches for identifying and serving children and families who are viewed as having serious and/or multiple needs; (3) to identify specific situations in which the *at promise* construct has the potential for producing negative outcomes for many of our nation's most vulnerable and most needy children and families; and (4) to present and to discuss an alternative model which involves and accommodates the positive aspects of both the *at risk* construct and the *at promise* construct approaches -- a model which views these constructs not as being necessarily oppositional but rather as complimentary.

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES "AT PROMISE": A LAUDABLE BUT POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS CONSTRUCT

Introduction

Criticism of the construct "children and families at risk" has grown substantially in recent psychology and education professional literature. The current discourse over "children and families at risk" has focused primarily on the belief system held by several observers that the popular construct "at risk" is highly problematic and implicitly racist, classist, sexist, and abelist. The "at risk" construct is viewed as constituting a 1990s version of the cultural deficit model which locates problems or pathologies in individuals, families, and communities rather than in institutional structures that create and maintain inequality (Lubeck & Garrett, 1990; Sleeter, 1995; Swadener, 1995). It has been strongly recommended that the "at risk" construct be deconstructed and replaced with a newer, more meaningful construct, "children and families at promise" (Fine, 1995; Polakow, 1995; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995).

Disenchantment with the "at risk" construct also can be currently witnessed in the proliferation of literature which has emerged during the 1990s that focuses on *resiliency* factors in children and families (Bernard, 1991, 1993a, 1993b; Braverman, Myers, & Bloomberg, 1994; Brooks, 1994; Burns, 1994; Garmezy, 1993; Joseph, 1994; Herrenkohl, 1994; Werner & Smith, 1992). Several writers, researchers, and child and family advocates, especially those involved in the development and implementation of *prevention* programs, have argued that the "at risk" construct is harmful, ineffective, and only leads to the dangerous labeling and further stigmatization of already disenfranchised populations, such as children and families living in poverty,

single-parent family configurations, members of racial/ethnic minority groups etc. (Bernard, 1993a, b; Burns, 1994; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990).

Resilience (or resiliency) researchers and program advocates (Bernard, 1993a; Burns, 1994; Cooper & Henderson, 1995; Hyman, 1992) presently are calling for a paradigm shift which focuses *not* on "risk factors or conditions" but primarily, if not exclusively, on the identification and nuturance of those *protective factors* in a child and family's environment which have been demonstrated to allow many children and families who live in very stressful environments and under extreme, adverse conditions to "bounce back" and even, in some cases, to excel. These researchers and program advocates have been particularly interested in understanding how a variety of factors can either sustain or undermine resilience in certain children and family members.

Risk and Resiliency Models

Risk Model

The dominant model which traditionally has guided most policymakers, researchers, and professionals in their efforts to help children and families considered to possess certain characteristics or deficiencies (internal or external) which are likely to produce negative outcomes for them (e.g., medically, socially, educationally etc.) is commonly referreed to as the *risk factor* or *risk indicator* model. Presumed cause/effect dynamics (e.g., physiological complications at birth; environmental events like poverty and homelessness; family events like divorce, living with a single parent, and child abuse; engaging in dangerous personal practices like substance abuse and unprotected sex etc.) that place individuals in danger of negative future events are identified. Subsequent to the identification of these risk factors, policies, programs, practices, and/or interventions are implemented to reduce,

or eliminate, the presumed negative effects which they will have on the future well-being of those individuals (e.g., dropping out of school, poor social adjustment; serious medical or mental illness etc.).

Risk factors generally have been viewed as multiplicative rather as additive. For example, Rutter's research with "problem children" showed that a single risk factor had no connection to failure in adulthood; however two risk factors quadrupled the chances of serious failure, and four risk factors increased the the chances tenfold (cited in Weissbourd, 1996, pp. 31-32).

Most "risk researchers" also have viewed the indicators of *riskness* to be interrelated. For example, Natriello, McDill, and Pallas (1990) identified five key indicators associated with children considered to be *educationally disadvantaged*: racial/ethnic minority status, poverty, single-parent families, poorly educated mothers, and limited-English proficiency. They argued that these indicators should not be viewed as being independent from each other, and and that children likely to be classified as educationally disadvantaged on the basis of one is more likely to be classified on the basis of the others. Children classified as educationally disadvantaged on the basis of several indicators are suggested to be at the greatest risk of educational failure.

Living in poverty households arguably has been the single most widely-cited indicator of producing negative outcomes for children and adolscents. It has been reported that poor children are two to three times more likely to drop out of school than are those children living in non-poverty households (Children's Defense Fund, 1996). Hodgkinson (1993, 1995) argues that the single factor that places most children at risk for educational failure is poverty (regardless of race or ethnicity).

Probably the most notable examples of the use of the "risk" paradigm relative to policy and program implementation which we have had in this

nation, especially as related to the indicator of *poverty*, are Head Start and Title I. Both of these programs have been based on the assumption that children identified as being poor are likely to be at a serious disadvantage for future educational and/or social success unless they are provided with specific interventions to reduce, or eliminate, the negative effects of this condition upon their performance.

Resiliency Model

The arguments of most proponents currently advocating for the deconstruction of the "children and families *at risk*" construct and its replacement with a "children and families *at promise*" construct (Fine, 1995; Polakow, 1995; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995) rely heavily upon the *resilience* paradigm which recently has witnessed substantial popularity in the *prevention* literature of health, mental health, child development, sociology, and education disciplines. In particular, during the 1990s several grants awarded to "resilience researchers" by the U.S. Department of Education Drug Free Schools and Communities Program have resulted in an unprecedented number of articles, books, conferences, workshops, and media products which have focused on the promotion of the "resiliency paradigm."

As stated by Linquanti (1992) *resilience* or *resiliency* is the construct used to describe the quality in children who, though exposed to significent stree and adversity in their lives, do not succumb to the school failure, substance abuse, mental health problems, and juvenile delinquency predicted for them. The presence of protective factors in family, school, and community environments appears to reverse or alter predicted negative outcomes and foster the development, over time, of resilience.

Very simply, the resilience model attempts to identify those factors (internal and external) which allows an individual to "bounce back" and to adapt successfully despite being exposed to stressful and adverse circumstances. Researchers are interested, for example, in determining why two children living in the very same "stressful environment" (e.g. extreme poverty, alcoholic parents, exposure to repeated violence etc.) might respond in dramatically different ways: one child fails miserably personally, socially, and educationally, while the other child may excel in these identical areas.

Bernard (1991) described four broad traits that characterize the resilient child: (1) *social competence* (e.g., responsiveness, empathy, flexibility, caring, communication skills, and a sense of humor); (2) *problem-solving skills* (e.g., abstract thinking, developing alternative solutions, goal-setting etc. both academically and socially; (3) *autonomy* (e.g., independence, a strong sense of self and identity, and a sense of mastery; and (4) *sense of purpose and future* (a strong sense of educational achievement, strong goals, persistence, and a positive view of the future.

Proponents of the resilience model (Bernard, 1991, 1992, 1993; Burns, 1994; Cooper & Henderson, 1995) argue that whether or not a child is able to bounce back from adverse circumstances depends on the degree to which he or she experiences certain *protective factors* which are considered to be those traits, conditions, and situations that alter or reverse potentially destructive outcomes. According to Bernard (1991) these *protective factors*, which can be found at home, in schools, and in the community, fall into three broad categories: (1) caring and support, (2) high expectations, and (3) encouraging children's participation.

Analysis of Current "At Risk/At Promise" Discourse

Clearly, critics of the "at risk" construct have raised several important points. To simply identify and label certain children and families (or specific *groups* of children and families) as being *at risk* can lead to negative outcomes for these persons. Misleading and dangerous stereotypes can be perpetuated. Children can be labeled, tracked educationally, retained unnecessarily, and not fully challenged (personally, socially, or educationally). "At risk" students too often have been provided with watered down curricula and they have been allowed to become victims both of self-fulfilling prophecies and the narrow, short-sighted visions and expectations of others.

Also, it is patently evident that far too often professionals representing a wide variety of disciplines within the human services field -- most certainly including psychologists -- have employed an extremely narrow deficit-oriented assessment-treatment paragigm in their efforts to help children and families assumed to be at risk of failure personally, socially, and/or educationally. Indeed, far too much "blame-placing" has occurred. In particular *strict* proponents of the "medical model" often have failed to develop effective, long-term solutions for the "problems" children and families are facing because their diagnostic and treatment approach has been *exclusively* one of searching for the presumed cause of the problem -- and not paying sufficient attention to other factors and conditions which may be more reflective of the "real problem." Arguably, our treatment/solution approaches traditionally have been far too pathological or deficit-oriented rather than being asset or strength oriented.

Proponents of the "at promise" and "resilience model" approaches provide a great deal of good insight and sound advice in their pleas for professionals to devote more energy and time to the identification of strengths and protective factors in a child's life. Children and families who are

"struggling" often will derive substantial benefit from receiving assistance in helping them to identify some specific assets or coping strategies which they may already possess, but do not necessarily recognize in themselves.

Suggested Dangers Re: the "At Promise" Construct

Despite the acknowledged dangers and *risks* of the *at risk paradigm*, which have been cited above, it is suggested that the current movement to deconstruct this construct and to replace it with the preferred *at promise* construct has two primary potentially dangerous and negative consequences of its own: (1) its oversimplicity, and (2) the strong likelihood which it possesses for the exploitation of many of our nation's most vulnerable, needy children and families by extremely conservative policymakers and bureaucrats.

Oversimplicity. As suggested by some researchers (Garmezy, 1991, 1993; Weissbourd, 1996), the resilience construct, if not fully understood in terms of its possible limitations relative to producing desired positive outcomes in programming for children and families, can result in negative consequences. To simply argue against the use of the commonly employed *at risk* indicators as a means of identifying those populations assumed to be in need of interventions and to replace them with *at promise* or *asset* indicators, based primarily upon language or philosophical objections to the specific terminology employed, may deny children and families the help which they require.

To exclusively focus on a child's strengths, while at the same time denying specific conditions and factors which may exist within that child or his/her environment -- conditions and factors which may contribute in

varying degrees to his/her vulnerability and which may require certain interventions -- arguably represents an oversimplistic perspective and solution to the problem. As stated by Weissbourd (1996), while loose risk-factor thinking as well as the wide variety of risk-assessment instruments which are now commonly used to determine the probability of numerous troubles in childhood or in later life are of very limited value, an overly simplistic view of what constitutes resilience likewise often is of limited value. In this regard, Weissbourd suggests that those who run programs and work with children need a more complex model for thinking about why and how invividual children are vulnerable.

Weissbourd (1996) argues that the currently popular notion of "resilient," or "invulnerable," or "super" children suggests that certain children have attributes that will enable them to weather almost any kind of stress and to bounce back from severe losses and blows -- and further that for many children, their vulnerabilities can be virtually eradicated (along with the strange notion that life without vulnerability is somehow the ideal human condition). To understand the true nature of childhood vulnerability -- and to avoid false, damaging predictions, Weissbourd (1996) suggests that it is critical to recognize that vulnerability and resilience are not static conditions. Because of complex interactions between children and their environments, children do not typically develop along some straight and narrow path. There are different pathways through every developmental stage, and children commonly zigzag, excelling in certain areas of development while lagging in others, struggling in certain segments of childhood while moving fairly easily through others.

When a child is described as resilient, it is often because a slide, a snapshot of that child has been taken at a particular point in time. A snapshot

taken five years later may reveal a child who is not weathering successfully the challenges and adversity presented by another developmental stage and another environment.Children described as resilient often are simply children who have not yet encountered an environment that triggers their vulnerabilities(Weissbourd, 1996).

While the resilience paradigm contains numerous positive aspects and while it is readily acknowledged as possessing the potential for identifying and nuturing traits and behaviors in children and family members which will allow them to not only survive but, at times, to excel against what often appear to be unsurmountable odds, caution is urged in its being viewed as a panacea. Child and family vulnerability is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon which does not lend itself to overly simplistic paradigms or solutions.

Danger of exploitation of children and families.

Advocates of the *at promise* construct (e.g., Fine, 1995) appear to take special pleasure in disparaging the contributions of such researchers and writers as Jonathan Kozol (*Savage Inequalities*, 1991) and Alex Kotlowitz (*There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America*, 1991) referring to their works as "texts of despair." Presumably, the works of Kozol and Kotlowitz -- as well those of many writers such as Harold Hodgkinson (1992, 1993, 1995) or Lisbeth Schorr (1989) -- who have attempted to identify the multiple, and often horrific, "at risk conditions" under which large and growing numbers of U.S. children live, are regarded as derelict, ineffective, and dangerous by the *at promise* paradigm advocates.

In a similar vein, most of the contemporary "resiliency researchers and program advocates" are suggesting that the *harmful* "at risk" paradigm needs to be replaced with the "resiliency paradigm" in order to improve conditions for children and families in the United States. They consistently point out how

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certain children and families, despite living in extremely adverse conditions, are able to pull themselves out of these situations -- without any expensive or governmental programming interventions: a revisiting of the "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" syndrome.

It is suggested that the arguments of both the *at promise* construct advocates and the *resiliency* paradigm advocates currently are playing into the hands of conservative politicians and policy makers who are using the "children and families can bounce back only if they try harder" argument to cut services and programs for many of our nation's neediest children and families. In this regard, we have already witnessed several examples of conservative politicans at both the national and state levels using, or more appropriately, *misusing* the resilience literature in an effort to buttress their arguments for cutting such programs as Head Start, free and reduced-lunch programs for poor children, AFDC programs, and shelter programs for homeless children and families.

Clearly, these efforts have extremely dangerous implications for many of our nation's most vulnerable children and families. Both at *promise* construct advocates and *resiliency* paradigm advocates have a responsibility to clarify this issue and to acknowledge the negative outcomes which can occur for children and families as a result of the concepts and information being generated by their respective positions. Thus far, their individual and collective voices have been very silent in this regard.

Irrespective of the specific language and the specific labels which are used to describe those children and families currently being discussed in the "at risk/at promise" discourse, it is important that we not lose sight of the fact that in the mid 1990s indefensibly large numbers of our nation's children and

families find themselves living in situations which are truly overwhelming. Many of these children and families possess multiple risk factors which are due largely to years of persistent and pervasive environmental and societal neglect. For most of these children and families, it could be argued that it matters little what efforts are made to improve their intrinsic values and coping mechanisms. Their external environments are simply too overwhelming to overcome. What most of these children and families need are not reduced or eliminated services but rather programs and personnel that can provide them with the supports and care which they require.

Emily Werner (cited in Bushweller, 1995), a research psychologist at the University of California at Davis who conducted one of the most extensive longitudinal studies of resilient qualities among children [E. E. Werner & R.S. Smith (1992), *Overcoming the odds: High risk children from birth to adulthood.*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press] argues strongly against the resilience construct becoming a widely adapted bandwagon approach for solving the problems of vulnerable children. Werner cautions against the resilience research being being inappropriately politicized. Further, she argues that the resilience research currently is being used to justify requests for the establishment of "resilience programs" in our schols and communities -- without any solid, empirical evidence that these programs actually will help children and families.

Call for a New Model

The current discourse involving the recommended deconstruction of the *at risk* construct and its replacement with the *at promise* construct raises several important and valid points which need to be given attentive consideration by all policymakers and professionals who are concerned about

producing more positive outcomes for all of our nation's children and families, especially those who daily are experiencing multiple difficulties within several life domains. Clearly, policies, programs, and interventions which are guided exclusively, or primarily, by the *at risk* construct can not only be short-sighted and ineffective, but also they can result in producing negative and damaging outcomes for those very persons that they are designed to help.

Certainly, policy makers and professionals must pay a great deal more attention to identifying and nuturing those specific strengths and assets which children and families already possess and not be consumed as much with *real* or *presumed* deficits in these persons. At the same time, however, proponents of the resilience and the at promise constructs must be very cautious that their efforts to deconstruct the at risk construct do not result, albeit unintentionally, in placing the children and families that they are trying to help in even greater jeopardy than they presently find themselves.

The harsh reality is that under most current national and state human services policies involving children and families the only way that needed services can be obtained is via categorical funding mechanisms. As egregious and as short-sighted as this situation may be -- and despite widespread efforts currently taking place throughout our nation to completely overhaul our overall human services delivery system to make it more responsive to the real needs of vulnerable children and families -- the unfortunate fact remains that many programs and services would not be available to children and families should one or more of their *at risk* identifying labels be removed.

Let me very clear regarding the essential concern that I am attempting to address relative to the at risk/at promise discourse. In no way do I intend to suggest that the current system and the current practices involving the need to label children and families as *at risk* in order to receive services are good

ones. They are not! Typically they serve only to devalue children and families while perpetuating dangerous stereotypes about them.

Proponents of *the at promise* construct are entirely accurate in their argument for the need to place greater emphasis on strengths and assets. However, at the same time, I suggest that in their rhetoric that they need to be cautious about not "throwing out the baby with the bathwater." It is very important that all of us who are concerned about the overall well-being of children and families work diligently to change those policies, practices, programs, and the specific *language* which arguably produce negative outcomes for these persons. Nevertheless, let us also be as equally diligent and cautious that we do not sacrifice these children and families to the concept of *at promise*.

It is suggested until that time when our nation truly has its priorites in order, and further that it can demonstrate its unequivical commitment to all children and their families, what is needed is an alternative model for understanding and for helping vulnerable children and families -- one which accomodates and complements both the *at risk* and the *at promise* constructs.

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